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THE CASE FOR THE BANJO

By EMILE GRIMSHAW

The more frequent use of banjos in broadcasting bands is a welcome and sensible attempt by band leaders to infuse their programmes with the verve that was always present in the pre-guitar days. Much that has been written against banjos and tenor banjos when used in dance bands should never have appeared in print. Only recently someone who was probably learning to count beads on a wire at the time in question suggested that there were no competent dance band banjo players in the 1920-30 period and that, in consequence, was the reason why the instrument ceased to be used professionally.

Obviously such an ill-founded opinion could be most damaging to the instrument in the unlikely event of it being taken seriously. It is to be assumed that the plectrum efforts of Harry Reser and Mike Pingitore, Paul Whiteman's Band; Nick Lucas, Oriole Terrace Orchestra; Pete Mandell, Savoy Orpheans; Dave Thomas, Savoy Havana; Len Fillis, Hylton's Kit Kat Band; and many others including Arthur Stanley, Freddy Lamb and Bert Bassett had much to learn according to the "well informed" contemporary contributor. The result of reading such twaddle is akin to "mal du mer."

Banjos and tenor banjos ceased to be generally used in dance bands about 1930. The appearance on the British market of records by Red Nicholls and His Five Pennies, in which Eddie Lang played a guitar, and several other similar small combinations of five or six players whetted the appetites of the more progressive band leaders in this country. Three or four years before, electrical recording had been introduced experimentally and by 1930 was adopted as standard by all the recording companies.

Prior to electrical recording it had always been necessary for the banjo player to sit on a high stool facing a horn or trumpet so that his efforts would etch themselves in the wax of the matrix and the sousaphone player stood with the bell of his instrument about a yard from another horn making the usually hopeless attempt to pound something on to the master record. The piano,

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usually an upright model to save space, was always well to the fore and the rest of the band was cramped together in the available room near the recording horns. As volume of sound was the first consideration and room for free movement was very restricted the results were surprisingly good considering the physical and mental difficulties. To play for hours on end seated on a high stool using the cross spindles as a foot rest should be tried to be appreciated. About a dozen different music stands were carefully arranged adjacently but at different heights to avoid obstructing the sound waves on their journey down the recording horns to the cutting needle.

The early electrical recording sessions took place in a totally different atmosphere. The band, consisting of about eighteen members, was arranged in the studio in four sections, brass, violins, saxophones, and rhythm, and each section had its own microphone. It is interesting to recall that though, in the early stages, microphones of accepted shape were used. several sessions were held when pick-ups similar to the old parchment cone-type loudspeakers were used instead of microphones.

Apart from the great improvement in tone generally, the advantages gained by electrically recording orchestral music were immense for it was possible to correctly balance the various sections and each instrumentalist was able to play without physical or mental strain. In fact everything progressed in a quieter and more comfortable manner and the opportunity to use instruments and vocal effects which previously had little recording value was seized immediately. Vocal trios became regular features of almost every recording. This again, was just another instance of the lead given by such bands as Paul Whiteman's, whose " Rhythm Boys " led by Bing Crosby, were one of the several vocal trios very much in the public ear at that time.

The ease with which soft voiced instruments could be recorded and the popularity of vocal refrains opened the door wide for the guitar as an accompanying instrument. Numerous Hill Billy and Hawaiian recordings became available and the plectrum guitar as we know it today slowly appeared in dance band recordings. But the change from tenor banjo to guitar was not immediate for at least one band leader who regularly featured a tenor banjoist recorded a few titles, the numbers from " Show Boat," with a plectrum guitar playing rhythm and subsequently decided that the rhythm of the band had lost much of its brightness and " lift " and reverted to the tenor banjo. The name of the band leader was Jack Hylton. It is interesting to note that during the entire period in which Jack Hylton had his band he always featured a tenor banjo.

I have mentioned these points, not in defence of the banjo for the instrument needs no defence, but merely to point out that although the call of fashion sooner or later had to be acceded to by bands here, there was considerable doubt about whether the instrument should be dropped entirely. Long after smaller club bands in London had adopted the guitar, banjos and tenor banjos were being used by Tommy Venn, Harry Roy's Band; George Morris, Debroy Somers'; Ronnie Genarder, Jack Payne; and Joe Branelly in the Ambrose Band.

It is extremely doubtful if many leaders really knew what a guitar was at first and they were certainly ignorant of its capabilities. They knew what a banjo could do and they were fully aware of the " gap " in the rhythm section when they appeared at an engagement without one. However, a change was taking place in the style of music and slow fox trots and waltzes were becoming more popular. The " exciting and hurried " music, " one steps " and quick fox trots, popular after the war had completely disappeared and the snap of the banjo was not so necessary. The mellow resonance of the guitar with the sentimental vocal accompaniment style of playing was soon in demand on " accompaniment " recording sessions and the banjoist quickly learned that " to keep in the swim " he would have to " double " on both instruments. The few who had sought refuge in tuning their guitars like banjos rapidly found that a knowledge of the correctly tuned guitar was necessary. The tenor banjoists, who were in the majority, had to learn a completely fresh tuning and some decided to take up plumbing and tailoring. Comparatively few of the guitarists who play regularly today have any knowledge of a banjo or tenor banjo.

The " excuse " for using a banjo today seems to be the mistaken idea of " authorities " that as the " Dixieland " style of music is popular the correct instrumentation for playing such music should include a banjo or tenor banjo.

When the Original Dixieland Jazz Band was playing here it consisted of a pianist, Russell Robinson; Joe Le Rocca, trumpet, and composer of the world famous " Tiger Rag "; Emile Christian, trombone; and Tony, the drummer. At no time did a banjoist play regularly with the Band though the writer enjoyed many hours of playing with them at the " Four Hundred Club " which is now the " Embassy Club " and is situted about a hundred yards from our Piccadilly address.

The reason why banjos are being used for this type of music is not only that they are the most suitable fretted instruments but they actually enhance the type of music. They improve many of the quicker dance numbers in which the bass player would play two beats per bar as is the case, or should be, with most Dixieland numbers.

Although the banjo has, since 1930, been regarded by many as " corny," it is interesting to reflect that the sole reason one London Band agency, run by a banjoist, was able to monopolise

(*Continued on next page*)

SOME IMPRESSIONS OF THE NORTHERN FESTIVAL

By W. TURLAND HILL

On Sunday, 16th October the Northern Section of the Federation held their Annual Festival at St. George's Hall, Liverpool.

It was the third I had attended and to me the most enjoyable. I can give a brief account of some of my impressions but outside the Band Contest I did not keep a record of winners; this fact is more significant than it at first appears, for the general spirit of the Festival was one of harmony, and the presentation of the best of which they were capable provided satisfaction enough to the contestants and audience; sorting out the winners was the job of the adjudicators and whatever their decision it was accepted; in most cases it coincided with the popular view.

I missed the solo contests, due entirely to attempting to travel by British Railways on other than a trunk line on a Sunday; I shall know better next time.

Of the Duet, Quartet and Band Contests, my impression was that team work is more popular in the North than solo playing, and as far as I could see the popularity of the duet contest was largely due to the desire to play together. This contest is a controversial one, but I think ultimately we shall have to admit that a duet consists of two performers on fretted instruments plus accompaniment, either piano or guitar; if not why accompaniment with solos?

This point is fairly obvious when one considers for example, (a) duet, two mandolins; solo and counterpoint excellent but obviously incomplete and musically unsatisfying or (b) duet, mandolin and guitar, which consists primarily of a solo with guitar accompaniment, in which a good rendering provides a more complete musical picture. This is not intended as a criticism of the performers for I thought they were all surprisingly good, but there are several points of view to be reconciled, including that of the adjudicators, the audience and of course the contestants. Deep down I believe we are trying to resolve a balance of these fundamentals.

The contest for Quartets provided good musical entertainment to both performers and audience, finally resolving itself into an issue between the claims of acoustic technique and electric tone.

The Band Contest more than justified the expectancy with which it was awaited. Four Bands only competed, of which Oldham was a popular winner; each in turn was good, in fact so good that very few points separated the judges' awards.

The test piece, Musical Comedy Selection (published by Messrs. Chappell & Co.) and arranged by Mr. Arthur Pearson of Oldham, was played by a combined orchestra of the Northern Clubs as a finale, and it was an exceedingly creditable performance, in fact one the most precise renderings I have yet heard by a body of more than fifty frets performers.

In the South we have constantly discussed each year the question "Are we to have piano and/or percussion in Band Contests?"

Without trying to answer the question I would like to congratulate the North for making a practical approach to the problem and offering "Award of Special Federation Medals for the best pianist and drummer."

I had the opportunity to talk to many old friends including the Chairman, Mr. J. Taylor and Secretary, Mr. W. Cook, and I think that we are all agreed that we can now go full speed ahead together restricted only by the efforts which *we* choose to exert for the cause, and the *we* means all.

My congratulations to the North for a splendid Festival.

LUTON MUSIC FESTIVAL

For the first time in the history of this Annual Festival contests will be included for Mandolin, Mandola, Lute and Guitar and cash prizes awarded. Entrants are allowed to select their own test pieces and points will be awarded for the quality of music chosen. The Adjudicator will be Dr. Hans Gals, Professor of Music, Edinburgh University. Full details of the contests which take place on April 1st, 1950, are to be obtained from Irene Bone, 7, New Bedford Road, Luton. Stamped addressed envelopes should accompany enquiries.

(*Continued from page 2*)

the dance band business in London for several years after the 1914-18 war was because Mayfair hostesses and private dance promoters insisted on a banjo in the band "because it put life into the band."

Should any guitarist be called upon to "double" on a banjo he must not regard it as an insult—forgive me Terry Usher—rather should he consider it an opportunity to make himself even more valuable as a member of the rhythm section by being able to provide a more suitable tone colour in appropriate numbers. He will never have the opportunity to forget how to play the guitar, however, for it will be in demand just as long as dance music retains a sentimental note and players are able to take an increasingly active part as "front line" soloists. The guitar is the ideal accompaniment for song whether Hill Billy, Hawaiian, or á la Elton Hayes. As a rhythmic and solo instrument it is established in the dance band but there is one thing it has never been able to provide and that is the bright cheerful effect of a banjo or tenor banjo.

SOME ASPECTS OF BANJOISTIC DISPLAY—IX

By G. A. KEELER

In the preceding article I wrote on the subject of the rate of learning and the rate of forgetting —that is to say some students of music learn in a quarter of the time taken by others, but on the other hand those who learn a piece easily sometimes forget much quicker than those who learn more slowly. Perhaps those who learn slowly or with difficulty come to recognise the necessity of training their memory. I know of no better plan to strengthen the memory than to learn an easy jig or two before proceeding to more difficult pieces, practising the easy jigs will help to discipline the memory. I advise beginners to work through a good number of grade "a" pieces before proceeding to grade "b" (moderately difficult) and finally to "c" (or difficult). A study of "musicology" or publishers' lists shows the classification of "easy," "moderate" or "difficult" on the whole to be rather well done. So grade your attempts accordingly. First of all, however, try to find out what type of learner you are, whether you learn by hearing a piece, in which case you are most likely to be classed as an "audile," or a learner by sight (a visile), or by touch (a motile). Sometimes a student will be found who embodies all three types. In any case there will, on your part probably be a "preferred" method. Some students learn by incorporating all three in their practising i.e. they listen intently, read meticulously and always stick to one fingering (the composer's fingering, in most instances, is the best). Remember that memory of that which we *see* is more easily acquired and maintained than that which we *read* or only *hear*. A famous shorthand writer—one of the fastest—advised his students to "get the system, or rules, out of the head and into the fingers." There is memory in the muscles. One writer has said "If you want to develop the brain in its highest capacity you must do it through the muscles of the hand." Sir John A. Cockburn affirmed that "memory resides largely in the muscles." Hence, in practising a piece of music (1) read intently; (2) listen carefully; (3) pay strict attention to the fingering, both left and right-hand fingering. To ensure uniformity in the fingering when practising it is obvious the best plan is to follow the printed fingering.

In the early stages of learning music the student will, of course, notice that the key signature is repeated at the beginning of every stave (or line of notes) whereas the time is only indicated once, except when it changes as is sometimes the case. Occasionally the student will be at a loss to remember whether he has played a movement once or twice. If bothered at all in this way the best plan is to pay particular attention to the codetta at the end of a movement. A codetta is a short passage serving to connect one period or movement with another. It may run up or down the scale when leading to the next movement and the student should take notice accordingly. If he has not run up or down (as the case may be) then he can be sure he has not repeated the movement. Later in his practising he may learn to analyse the chord progression or resolution of a passage as this is a memory aid of great importance. Always endeavour to play a piece right through from beginning to end, and so retain the sequence, however imperfect it may be at the start, but—be careful not to practise mistakes as their repetitions will, of course, stamp them in. Therefore, hasten slowly.

Many years ago I wrote an article on "Music Reading as an aid to Practice" and I know that looking through a piece two or three times before starting actually to play it is a very great help. If you mark Italian or French words with the English equivalent this practice, too, is helpful. Thus the Italian word "Fastoso" means "with a jolly and splendid style of execution." You need only mark your music "jolly." A red line denoting the end of a movement will assist you to find the place easier when you return to it.

Just as we renew old acquaintanceship so we should renew acquaintance with old friends, i.e. old compositions. Neglect to keep the acquaintance alive will lead to their dropping out of the memory. Memory improves with continual training and constant usage.

Just as I penned the aforegoing lines a letter came to hand from Mr. A. A. Farland, the famous banjoist, whose feat of memory in playing from the works of classical composers has never been surpassed. He memorised amongst many other compositions, Mendelsohnn's Concerto for the Violin. I heard him play at the old St. James' Hall, London, 46 years ago. Farland is now 85 years of age and he tells me he practises the banjo one hour daily.

To conclude this section on memory I will quote from Mr. Reid Stewart, namely, "without memory, musical appreciation would be an utter impossibility, for it is only by remembering what notes in combination sound like that the listener is enabled to appreciate the logical continuity and formal structure of the music as a whole. The ability to memorise proves itself on analysis to be little more than the ability to concentrate for lengthy periods, sufficient to ensure the correct knowledge of a work in all its detail. Concentration itself is entirely a matter of will power, it involves the determination to banish all those irrelevant thoughts and considerations which drift into the mind, tending to divert it from its immediate concern."

(To be continued)

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PARS ABOUT PLAYERS

Two new recordings by Tarrant Bailey and His Tarrantellas about to be issued should prove even bigger sellers than his last Decca discs "Parade for Pleasure" and "Love's Sweet Song" which, by the way, are very popular in Canada and the U.S. The new numbers to appear soon are "Changing Moods," "Tin Soldiers," "Dutch Daffodil," and "Loony Coon."

Hugo D'Alton's brilliant mandolin recital at the Wigmore Hall gave many players of the instrument much food for thought. Not since the days of Mario de Pietro has any player done more to popularise the instrument and demonstrate its capabilities in a serious manner. Britain now has a great mandolinist.

Kealoha Life has returned to Cape Town after three weeks in Johannesburg with Hansi Van Loggerenberg's Orkester. Now broadcasting with the Royal Hawaiian Islanders and the Edward Hotel Orchestra in Cape Town he tells us that, contrary to reports in this country that there is little scope for fretted instrumentalists in the Union, there are plenty of opportunities for professional players with broadcasting and solo playing experience.

Many players have noticed the remarkable similarity of tone of the zither music in the film "The Third Man" to a trio consisting of a Hawaiian and finger style guitars and a string bass. It was difficult to believe all the music was played by one man on a zither even though the man behind the control panel in the recording booth was responsible for the quality and quantity of tone. When one considers that the natural acoustic tone and volume of a zither is comparable to that produced by a mandolin and mandola it is doubtful if any zither has been heard to similar advantage. It is interesting to note that after the film is shown in the various towns on its tour around the country thousands place orders for the zither recording of the film music.

The Watford club are now holding their meetings at the "New Inn," King Street, Watford. The conductor, Mr. T. C. Jones, who is leaving shortly for South Africa, has been largely responsible for the great progress made by the Club since the war and he, it will be recalled, led them to victory at the Federation Festival. Before the war Mr. Jones was a prominent member of Arthur Lee's Plymouth Club, probably one of the largest and most successful combinations in the country at the time. Obviously the departure of such an experienced player and conductor is a loss to the Watford Club. Fortunately, Billy Bignell, whom many will remember as the conductor and organiser of the West Herts Club, will be taking over the baton and it can be expected that the Club will maintain the already high standard of playing.

Those who attended the Annual General Meeting will recall the beneficial effect produced by the drummer of the Watford Club during the community playing. This gentleman certainly has the right idea and very ably demonstrated that a drummer with a knowledge of fretted instrument music is a necessity that should not be dispensed with. The Northern Section organisers realised this when they gave a medal to the best drummer at their recent Festival. Club pianists were also able to compete for a medal and the test piece had an eight bar solo for the piano. What Lancashire does today . . . . !

The Southern Section Festival will be held at the Hackney Central Hall on March 25th next year. The following admission fees include programmes: non-members 3/-, non-playing members 2/6, competitors 2/6 one entry. The first division test piece for bands is Mr. F. C. Musselbrook's arrangement of "Men of Arnhem." "Show Boat" has been selected as the second division test piece.

The Birmingham Club, formed by Mr. A. R. Tysall a few months ago, is now an established success. Originally, he had in mind a dozen or so players, now the Club has over fifty members and continues to grow and is an excellent example of what can be done with good organisation and leadership.

A Grand Concert will be given by the London Banjo Club and the Fulham (Monday) Club on Dec. 10th at the St. Bride Institute, Ludgate Circus at 7 p.m. Tickets may be obtained from Tom Downing, 12, Bercta Road, London, S.E.9.

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Essex and Cammeyer 5 string, 11" vellum, metal hoop, case ... £5 0 0

Metal hoop, 5 string, new 11" vellum, good condition, case ... £5 0 0

"Dulcetta" zither, new 8½" vellum, with brown leather case £5 0 0

Essex metal hoop, 10" vellum, fitted resonator and flange, with case £5 0 0

Windsor "Popular No. 3," 10½" vellum £3 0 0

Joe Daniells 5 string, 10½" vellum, wood hoop £3 0 0

S. S. Stewart 5 string, 10½" vellum, metal hoop £3 0 0

FINGERSTYLE GUITARS

"Lacote" type model, repolished, excellent tone, case £9 9 0

"Panorma" type model, exquisite pearl purfling around edge of body and sound hole, good tone, including case £12 12 0

PLECTRUM GUITARS

GRIMSHAW "G.5. Revelation," f hole model, gold plated fittings, fitted fingerboard pick-up unit and fingerplate controls, repolished and refretted, new condition, including case £45 0 0

GRIMSHAW "Revelation" f hole model, front and back sunburst, in good condition, with case ... £20 0 0

"Harlem" f Hole model, this guitar has been completely repolished and refretted, complete with case £16 0 0

Epiphone "Olympic" f hole in very good condition, with case £13 0 0

Paramount f hole model, elaborately engraved nacrolaque fingerboard and fingerplate, complete with case £13 0 0

"Hartford" f model, good condition, in case £13 0 0

"Hartford" 5" round sound hole model, good condition, case ... £12 0 0

"Radiotone" f hole model, with case £9 0 0

"Hartford" 5" round sound model, fitted vibrato unit, with case ... £8 0 0

Michigan "Valencia" round sound hole, sunburst model £6 6 0

HAWAIIAN GUITARS

GRIMSHAW Electric Hawaiian similar to Electrawaiian Model A finished mahogany, sensitivity unit, inlaid flush frets, with case £16 0 0

GIBSON "Roy Smeck" acoustic Hawaiian model, in new condition, large body, very resonant and powerful tone, case ... £15 0 0

"Allied" Twin neck electric steel guitar, fitted new fingerboards and repolished. Case £12 0 0

EMILE GRIMSHAW & SON, 54-55 Piccadilly, London, W.1. Phone **Regent 6977**

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